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## Sweet Revenge

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## SWEET REVENGE

Dora's father came to visit her a few weeks before he shot himself. He came to her after being thrown out of all manner of relations' homes. He had made them feel foolish by playing out a revitalized need to act the stud.

Nicholas lounged, unannounced, on her doorstep. He wore a tan suit and a gold medallion which swung the length of his chest as if he were a keeper of time. That evening her father entertained, playing music too loud, pulling her friends out of their chairs and dancing close to them, provoking them. 'Polyester pantsuit,' one of her friends called him behind his back. Dora tried to laugh.

"I can stay with you Dora, can't I?" he asked. "Nobody else will consider taking me in."

She had always permitted him to have his way. He crept back to Dora's mother countless times over the course of twenty years. Each time both of his women accepted him. Dora would run to her father, hopeful of his commitment; maybe this time he would stay intact, proper.

"Yes," Dora said. She couldn't look him in the eyes, this chameleon.

"Your friends need a little music," he said, playing it, dancing for them. His desperation made her wince.

Her father called whatever took possession of him 'The Force,' as if he could chain this demon in the basement. He used to lift Dora by both arms and swing her through the air until she cried out in pain. For a few years he had taken the prescribed lithium. It made him passive, aged him.

"Flaccid," he told her. "I couldn't get it up anymore." That was her father's explanation for the breakup of his marriage. "Any real woman would have left me."

Dora did not mention the dishes dropped on her mother's feet, the ten broken toes. She plucked at her dress as her father talked, searching for stray hairs. She meant to explain about his temper, she meant to tell him it was her mother's choice, not some chemical equation.

Stan, her father's oldest friend, relayed the message.

"I found him in his car," Stan declared, biting the words, etching them into her ear. "The gun was lying on the seat. It was horrible."

Stan blamed her, remembering Nick the prankster, stolen cars in the parking lot, the looting of local stores for tuxedos, finding girls and more girls as if he were netting fish off a floodbank.

Stan waited upon her father's passions. Once, a younger Dora had arrived home to find the two of them scheming like small children. Her father had sworn her to secrecy. Stan took her aside, pressing his hand, slick and cool, to her face, threatening her.

"Dora would never tell her mother I was here," he said, smelling of aftershave. Nothing else. Whenever Dora felt afraid after that she tried to find his scent in the air.

Dora held the phone away from her ear as Stan repeated what he had first said, his incantation.

"The car. The gun. A note for you and your mother. Let me read it."

She knew the words before he said them. It was her legacy. She could hum a tune to them. Weeks after the funeral she found herself pressing the coffin into the landscape in front of her, distractedly revving her car when there was no need to: her father to earth, soil to magnetized body.

"It's calling me," Nicholas would say, standing on his chair. He would begin in elation, taking her to an amusement park, treating her to anything she wanted, but Dora, knowing what came next, refused to order. They would be on the ferris wheel when suddenly his face, plasticized with joy, would slump and cave in.

"My father," she once said to her mother, "he wasn't there. He isn't here now. What father?"

Nicholas sat, erased by his chair, ignoring them both.

"My father went away," Dora insisted to her mother. She was seven at the time. Her mother repeated the story to her later as an explanation for her divorce. Dora did not need that; she understood.

"I was surprised you loved him enough to stay with him that long," Dora said.



"You loved him too," her mother assured her. Dora knew she had to agree. She was unclear on her mother's definition of love. What she felt for her father was a mixture of emotions. When she pulled it apart she could not reconnect the strands.

"Did I love him?" Dora asked herself in the weeks after his death. She felt uncomfortable. Was that the measure of her love, its pitch?

The first package arrived on Monday.

It was small and square. There was no return address, the label handwritten. Dora, tearing it open, thought it was a gift sent to her by a concerned relation. She had to stop and think for a minute when she discovered a maroon notebook under the newspaper and brown parcel paper, the notebook she had made for her father as a coming-home present. She pulled it out of the wrapper, stroking its leather cover, finding his name engraved in the corner; then she dropped it onto the floor. The paper fell with it, like confetti.

Inside were notes on Dora. Daughter Dora. She flipped through the pages at night alone in her apartment. She read it under a green light that she found in a junk store. Her eyes, following the slant of the handwriting, could pick up trends. Sometimes the pen was firm in his hand, sometimes liquid with sleep, sometimes frenzied.

*Nicholas Loves Dora*, he wrote on one otherwise blank page. A grade school poem. Dora closed the book, left it on her night table. Tried sleep. Failed. Found some sleeping pills in her cabinet and drank them down.

In the morning she sorted out the paper to find the postmark. It did not amuse or console her to find, in red ink, Stan's home town.

Her father stayed with her for two weeks. She brought home her boyfriend once and her father measured him with a sturdy, quizzical gaze.

"Do you want to marry her?" Nicholas asked.

"Who?" Bob looked at Dora, then at her father, unprepared for this assault. She had explained in the car that her father was a sick man, using that as a catchword; she had not explained that he was demeaning, impersonal, harsh.

"Marry Dora."

"Why do you want to know?" Bob asked.

"I'm her father, I have rights. You have to tell me first." Nicholas moved closer, put one hand on Bob's shoulder. "Is she good in bed?" he asked. Then Nicholas turned up the record player.

And this is my father, Dora thought, as she watched him swing around the room. He reached for her, pulling her onto the living room floor to dance with him. She had a feeling in her stomach, as if milk were curdling inside.

Her mother had insisted on Dora's strength. "You're incredible, you can take anything," she would say as she scraped mercurochrome onto a cut while Dora sat, unblinking. Even as a child, Dora knew better. She contained things. Radioactive waste was contained in lead. What a blank exterior! Studying herself in the mirror she lifted a hand to press a hair back in place, to make her face, so peculiar, so dark, perfectly framed.

The second package came on Friday. Dora had just received her paycheck. She was thinking of calling Bob, of going out that night, of drinking and driving. She drank to forget, she drank with Bob because it created a bridge to making love and she could collapse on any bed, could pull him on top of her, could turn, burying him.

The package was large. Inside of it was a cardboard box; inside of that, her father's dress suit. Dora, lifting the suit out of the box, studied it. Herringbone, padded shoulders, the vest with one button missing. As a child she had watched him leave the house wearing it to work, to interviews; he would return, sometimes days later, with his hair ruffled by an alien wind. His suit would fly off in pieces and his voice would rise.

"They never understand me," he'd complain. Her mother covered Dora's ears.

Dora asked her mother, "Why doesn't he die?" Dora wanted the primness of a funeral, that relief; she, the proper daughter, standing above the grave as they lowered him. She did not like the movement from city to city, the apartments they clustered in together, waiting for someone to discover her father, for her father to announce his presence. We waited, Dora thought, for the ax to fall. She had a complete understanding of that phrase.

She put the cardboard box with the suit inside her closet, didn't bother to study the postmark.



Dora's job required her to draw architectural blueprints. She was an expert in stress, searching out the defects in tall buildings that could topple them in earthquakes or leave them prey to fire.

At home, she avoided the book on her nighttable, could not lift it, imagined her fingers would fry off, imagined an electric chair, the criminal trapped inside. She thought she could smell the odor of singed hair.

Dora knew depression.

"It's normal," Bob said. "Your father died." He pulled her into his arms, ranging them around her. They offered no protection.

A call came for her one afternoon, the phone ringing as she hurried the key into the lock.

"A package for you at the post office," said some impersonal male voice. Dora put it off for days; finally she arrived at her branch, only to find that they had not called.

Punishment. She twitched at night, her fingers tightening around her knees. She pulled them in her half-sleep as if they offered a defense. She could not remember her dreams.

One night late she bit down on a cigarette and remembered her father in that room, dancing around. He danced a tango by himself.

"Without sex you're not really alive," he said.

She remembered a year when she and her mother had lived in a two-bedroom apartment in New York. They waited for her father to return from Italy, from some girl he had found. When he did come back, Dora hoped for some imperfect face, a cubist painting, one eye looping his forehead, a twisted nose; she hoped that some guardian of the law had gotten to him first, rearranging his features.

The night he danced that solitary tango in her living room, Dora sat in her red armchair, chain-smoking.

"I don't trust myself," he told her, a little boy's face.

"Trust yourself to do what?" she asked.

"I can't go on." He stopped the dance, stood in front of her dumbly, some show animal that had broken a leg, that would have to be destroyed.

"Go on where?" she asked, forcing herself not to understand.

"I don't want to be alive," he said.

There. It was out. Dora watched him, retreating inside herself until she was a squirrel, caught in her tree body, looking out of a peephole.

"Did you hear me?" Nicholas studied her, skeptically.

"I heard you." It was a technical voice, they were diagramming some building to see how it would hold up in a hurricane, to see which windows would give out, floating over the metropolis like magic carpets.

"What should I do?" he asked.

"Father." It was a difficult word for her. At younger times it had been all right to call him 'father,' but after he left them alone that entire year, after the phone calls, the letters promising his return, after her mother wandered through the apartment dazed and fragile, Dora had no excuses left. She called him Nicholas.

"Yes." Nicholas eyed her and she saw all the spent hopes, all his promise. She would have cried but he had not allowed her to know how.

"Don't talk to me like this, I don't want you to die," she said, with some conviction, and thought at least that came out all right.

Nicholas looked down at his hands, saying nothing. She wondered if he had studied them before, if during his numerous hospitalizations he had spent the time counting the veins in them as they thrust through the skin, roses breaking through their buds.

"I made such a fearful mess," he said. Dora smiled.

"Not at all, I can clean up," she said.

"No, no."

But she worked around him, lifting ashtrays and dumping them out. She even swept the kitchen floor. In the living room she heard his body drop softly onto the couch, knew he would be asleep. She crept back to her bedroom, her own body tensed.

"Daughter," he said. Spoken softly, unrecognizable. "I love you."

She meant to thank him because it deserved thanks; instead she walked into her bedroom and closed the door. Her hand wrapped around the doorknob afterwards for a few minutes, as if in protest.

The next night he assaulted her friend Suzy, pulling her towards the bedroom. Dora, following her friend's progress, saw Suzy's knee moving expertly into his balls, saw her father down on the rug, another disaster. She could not sweep him up, couldn't roll him into the rug and dump him out.

She evicted him. Nicholas didn't argue. He kissed her goodbye shyly, on one cheek, and vanished onto a westbound train.



Why do I still believe in his power? she wondered. Dora had spent so many years dreaming of crumbling walls, tidal waves, earthquakes, years of nightly disasters, but none of it had matched the ferocious strength of her own father. Now, by force of will, he had achieved his own immortality.

Dora began to chain-smoke. She bought a bottle of Scotch. She settled in, as if for a long, northern winter. I can get through this, she thought, as long as there's nothing else. No more mementos I'm expected to cherish.

It was another payday and on her doorstep she found another package. Inside there were small things. Nicholas's watch, his ties, his underwear.

How am I supposed to care for this? she wondered.

"You're my inheritor," Nicholas had insisted once, caught up in a rush of Shakespearean fervor.

Damn him, she thought, damn his inheritance.

Then she remembered the chain he had worn the last time. It had almost hypnotized her, swinging to and fro, that sigh of Las Vegas sex.

Opening her father's address book she noted all the changes of address, her futile efforts to evade him. She skipped the pages until she reached Stan's name and number. She said it out loud as she dialed. Stan, who was so ominous and lean, his moustache scratching against her face as he pretended to kiss her. For Stan's amusement her father had lifted her by both arms, making himself into a windmill. Dora had been terrified. She believed she would crack against a wall, crumple up onto the floor, and lie there, forgotten.

"Hello."

Stan's voice resurrected her father. Nicholas stood in front of her, holding out both hands. Was she supposed to embrace him or punish him? Dora forgot what she had meant to say.

"What is this, a trick?" Stan asked.

"No trick," she said, and struggled to regain her voice. "Stan." Saying his name gave her confidence. "Stan," she said again, "if I receive one more package, one more letter, one more vicious call, I'll find a man who shoots people and I'll pay him as much money as he wants. I'll get you, or I'll sue you," she added, weakening. "I'll do something."



"Get me?" Stan said, "Sue me?" He laughed. "This must be Dora. You were always a great believer in justice."

"Was I?" Dora asked.

"Your father told me to send his things to you," he said. He laughed again as if it was a joke. Stan was lost in time, she decided. Maybe he still believed that Nicholas had not stepped over that line.

"When did Nicholas ask you?" Dora said. Her voice shook, but she had to go on. "Before or after he stuck the gun in his mouth?"

There was a long silence. "You're nuts," Stan said finally; then he slammed down the receiver.

"Not me," she told the empty phone, "I refuse to be nuts, I just refuse."

She smoked one last cigarette. Then she stood, moving efficiently. She threw out the notebook with the remains of her breakfast. Gathering the suit, ties, socks and underwear, she packed them into a collapsible cardboard box. She covered it in newspaper and brown paper, tying it with sturdy twine. She sealed the edges with tape and carried it downstairs.

In a shopping mall she found a bin marked Goodwill. Peace on earth, she thought, good will to all men. Even to you, Nicholas.

Opening the metal hatch, she dropped the box down, then turned smartly, as if she were saluting. The metal door clicked shut. She raised her eyes. She began to recognize the shapes of things: cars, trees, buildings. People's voices carried back to her. Dora turned to go, then turned back again.

She surveyed the parking lot, full of its everyday logic. A couple with a small child were passing in front of her. The father lifted his daughter by the arms to set her on his shoulders. Dora winced and closed her eyes, but when she opened them the child was still there, tugging on his shirt. She smiled at them and they smiled back, the child squealing with pleasure. It's true, Dora thought with a rush of elation, I do know them, I know them and this is all familiar.